

In our modern world of globalization and advanced technology, many of us are looking into our ancestral roots to feel more grounded. In the past decade, there has been a growing interest in genealogy and DNA testing. We are searching the past, hoping to find clues to better understand who we are and how we tick. The magical power of puppetry can tap into this common yearning, help connect us to our ancestors, and hopefully help us become more whole.

In early animistic cultures, puppets navigated between the worlds of the living and the dead, dancing across each side of the veil. In my recent production of "My Grandfather's Prayers," I summon the versatile puppet semi-gods to help us converse in the twilight between past and present.

Puppetry, like traditional theatre, has its roots in religious ritual,

My Grandfather's Prayers: Puppets and the Ancestors

by *Lisa Aimee Sturz*

I am fascinated by the numinous quality of the puppet. I find it allows audiences to connect more fully to the mystery, majesty, and meaning that permeate our lives.

folklore, and magic. Puppets date back at least three thousand years to ancient Egypt, Greece and India. In Medieval Europe, puppets performed in pageant plays; the French word "marionette" refers to the "little Mary's" that told the story of Christ. Japanese Bunraku, from the 16th century evolved from earlier Shinto religious practices. Traditional Indonesian shadow puppets are thought to contain the souls of deceased ancestors and it is the "dalang" or priest who animates the figures.

While attending Grinnell College many years ago, I double-majored in Theatre Arts and Religious Studies with a particular interest in Carl Jung's work with the collective unconscious, dreams, and comparative mythology. I presented my religion thesis as a fluid puppet drama spanning several time periods and religious cultures. It made sense. Before graduating, I took a career placement test that suggested I become a rabbi or priest. I was amused by the results, but then realized that "puppeteer" isn't so far off. Throughout my professional life, I have created multiple shows around the intersection of mythology, religion and theatre. After all, I do come from a long tradition of Jewish rabbis and cantors. While the rabbi is the spiritual leader and the interpreter of Jewish laws, the cantor leads the liturgical part of the religious service chanting the ancient prayers.

"My Grandfather's Prayers" is centered on my relationship with my maternal grandfather, Cantor Izso Glickstein (1889-1947). Izso was a fourth generation Jewish cantor born in the Ukraine. He was a musical prodigy, the leading tenor with the Hungarian Opera, a World War One chaplain, Uber-Cantor at the largest synagogues in Europe and then New England, a generous humanitarian, and Leonard Bernstein's earliest musical mentor.

The Hebrew prayers he sang date back at least as far as the 7th century. The haunting melodies of the "chazzanut" tradition, with their sweet wavering quartertones, have long been used to comfort the sick and dying, beg for forgiveness, petition "Yahweh" (Hebrew name for god), and express gratitude for life's many blessings. Izso had an extraordinary voice and a deep understanding of the soothing potency of song. Crowds gathered outside the synagogue during the Jewish High Holidays to hear his



golden voice shine through the darkness.

Izso invoked the transcendent power of music to express the passion and determination of a people holding on to faith and tradition through the violent diaspora of the twentieth century.

Izso passed away before I was born, but I listened to him on Victor and Columbia recordings from the 1920's and grew up immersed in family lore about him. When asked to participate in a Slam at the Puppet Showplace in Brookline, Massachusetts, I decided to create a short tribute to my grandfather who lived in the Boston area the second half of his life. What started as a simple five-minute piece, developed into a two-year research project culminating in a one hour multi-media performance exploring my ancestry, artistry, personal and professional identity, and spirituality.

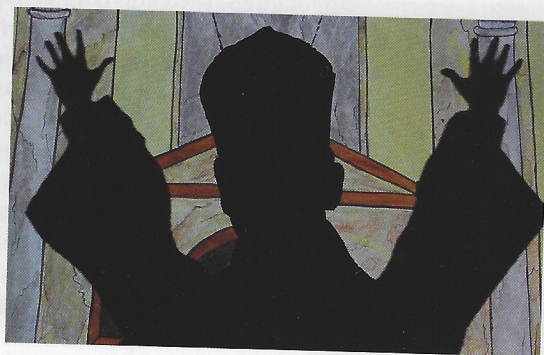
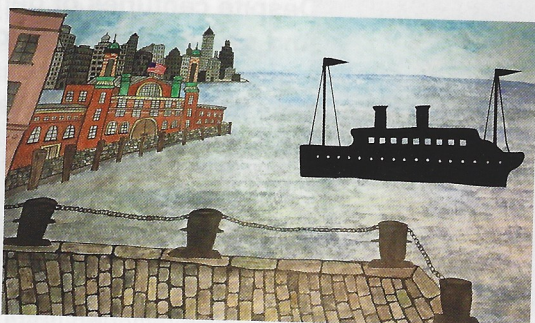
Izso's story became my own. His profound artistic achievements challenged my artistic insecurities. I needed his blessing for my own creativity to bloom. I interviewed family members and found hundreds of newspaper clippings and photographs. I contacted Jewish museums and musical scholars. I found translations for the prayers he recorded and listened to them over and over. I traveled to Budapest to walk the streets of the Jewish Quarter, visit

the Great Dohany Street Synagogue and the Hungarian Opera where Izso had sung, and search for official family documents. I dreamed about him. I spent months synthesizing the discoveries and shaping my thoughts into a puppet performance for teens and adults. "My Grandfather's Prayers" portrays Izso's remarkable journey from shtetl to stardom in the context of my own life as a 21st century hard-working, non-religious, self-doubting, female puppeteer listening intently for my own voice. The drama unfolds through toy theatre, a hand-painted crankie, dozens of shadow puppets, simple Czech-style marionettes, oversized props, slides, digital compositing, and poetic text.

Izso's recordings are the centerpiece of the audio score. They are augmented by snippets of opera, klezmer music, Hungarian folk tunes, Hebrew chants and classical music. I sought to add text without obscuring the musicality. I considered ways my grandfa-

tions. Jung refers to the integration of the "shadow" "side of one's personality. And the play of light and darkness is integral to many religious writings. In Judaism, there is an "eternal light" which shines above the Torah ark symbolizing God's presence passed down through generations. These metaphors come together with the simple elegance of the black articulated silhouettes. I also use floating shadow screens in various shapes containing transparencies of old photographs and historical images. And I incorporate the "shadow elements" of my grandfather's legacy as he struggled with infidelity and a propensity for smoking and gambling.

Some of the action emerges in front of the shadow screen with three-dimensional scenic elements, Czech-style marionettes and oversized props. These techniques distinguish some of the more visceral events such as Izso's opera career, love life, World War One, and professional acclaim. There is a scene in which his three



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ther skillfully and poignantly translated its meaning through song. I needed to speak with an "otherness" that resonated beyond the mundane. To this end, I added rhymed poetic narration.

I begin the show holding a Torah (a scroll containing the first five books of the Hebrew bible) in front of what appears to be a curtained ark (cabinet where this sacred text is kept.) The ark becomes a "toy theatre" as the Torah is undressed and transformed into a scrolling painted backdrop or "crankie". The crankie or "cantastoria" (Italian for story singer) is an illustrated moving scroll turned by a performer telling a story. Fittingly, this theatrical form derived from 6th century India where it was used to tell religious tales of Gods and the afterlife. My twenty-five yard crankie depicts scenes from Izso's life. It is most often lit from behind and animated with articulated shadow figures that bring us back.

To the sounds of a Jewish shtetl deep in the Ukraine Where ancient Hebrew prayers are still proclaimed.

From the start, I knew that shadow puppetry would be an essential ingredient. In some cultures, shadow figures represent the souls of deceased ancestors carrying the "seed" for the next genera-

children strive to meet his high academic expectations. We construct a staircase out of oversized books with an Izso marionette perched atop. The doll-like children add humor as they struggle to climb the academic ladder to gain his favor.

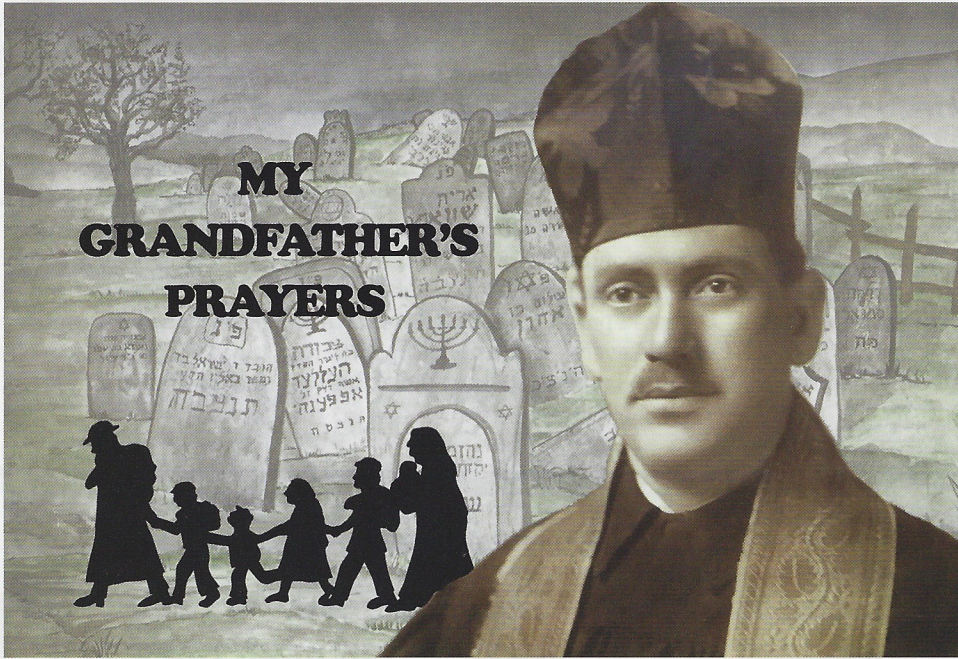
The best way to garner Izso's coveted attention Is to show intellectual prowess and reading comprehension

The books are later reconfigured to become a "boat of learning" on which Izso sails to Palestine to conduct scholarly research on the origins of the Hebrew chants.

I weave in and out of the story, sometimes commenting, and sometimes participating. I share personal reflections about my Jewish upbringing, family secrets, ambition, and social responsibility. I present a slide show of my research and share my frustration over its factual shortcomings, assuming "poetic license" in its stead.

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Captions, clockwise: Lisa and Izso, photo by Emily Bader; Arriving at Ellis Island, photo courtesy of Lisa Sturz; Blessing, photo courtesy of Lisa Sturz.



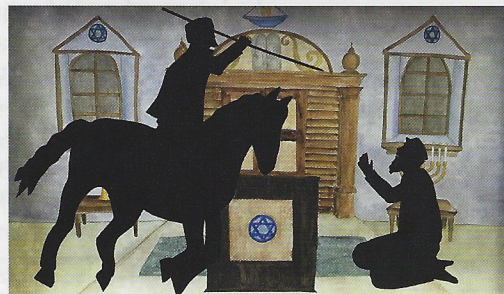
Poster for My Grandfather's Prayers/Photo by Lisa Sturz.

Moved by the collective experience and the personal memories it invokes, many volunteer their own history, experiences, and longings... Audiences have included members of different faiths, immigrants, Holocaust survivors, refugees, clergy, family, students, genealogists, evangelists, and all sorts of artists.

**I wish I had been there at Aunt Esther's famous Passover Seders
I wish I were a Yiddish, German, Hungarian, Russian, Hebrew translator
I wish I had the chance to know the man His seed accounts for one fourth of who I am
I wish I could talk to him soul to soul
In hopes to fill a lingering hole**

Near the end of the show, I project a short movie in which Izso and I appear together. I question him about his personal, secular and religious life. He explains the choices he made and expresses his regrets. I thank him for his inspiring work. He thanks me for creating the show in his honor. Izso hands me a gift encouraging me to unwrap my own creativity. We embrace. He gives me his blessing.

To achieve this heartfelt reunion, I copied and cut old photographs to make two-



Pogrom/Photo by Lisa Sturz

dimensional jointed figures. I manipulated them on camera against a green screen. I performed the scenes as myself separately, also against a green screen. Using Photoshop and After Effects, we added digital backgrounds and composited the images into one scene. The result is haunting and deeply satisfying. I can feel the audience respond to the alchemy of meeting a deceased love one and reaching closure.

**My grandfather's prayers soothed those who were displaced
Humiliated, tortured, and disgraced
Because of souls like him, souls like me survived
Despite centuries of genocide
And so, I offer prayers to my grandfather long deceased
Olav ha-shalom, may he rest in peace.**

The show is a eulogy. I feel a little like a rabbi; the audience is my congregation – my community. Moved by the collective experience and the personal memories it invokes, many volunteer their own history, experiences, and longings. It creates connection. Audiences have included members of different faiths, immigrants, Holocaust survivors, refugees, clergy, family, students, genealogists, evangelists, and all sorts of artists. We all share our humanity. Exploring my roots has enabled me to stand taller and reach farther. I am part of a family tree in a vast forest and I can see the sun poking through the many limbs and casting mysterious shadows. I feel fulfilled.

I want to acknowledge the production team who made the show possible:

Emily Bader helped design and paint the crankie and many of the shadow figures. She also was assistant puppeteer and offered much helpful feedback. Rebecca Williams acted as a dramaturg and directed us throughout the rehearsal process. Kira Bursky shot the footage of me against green screen and did most of the digital compositing using After Effects. Shane Meador shot all the animated puppet scenes. Theo Sturz captured sound for the filmed sequences and acted as Izso's stand in for many of the two-shots. George Scott was the sound engineer and recorded the five voice actors. Mark Blessington and Jerry Pope offered technical support. I also want to thank Roxie Myrhum and the Puppet showplace, The Asheville Jewish Community Center, the Amy Mandell & Katina Rodis Foundation, and all of the contributors for their support and encouragement.

Lisa Aimee Sturz, a full time puppeteer for over 40 years, works with theatre, film, television, opera, museums, schools and special events. She is Artistic Director of Red Herring Puppets, based in Asheville, North Carolina.